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ABSTRACT

To determine whether the work activities of a school superintendent are different when the superintendent is a woman rather than a man, three women superintendents were observed for a week each during the fall of 1979. This study was then compared with a 1977 study of three male superintendents conducted by the author. While the characteristics of the work of female and male superintendents are identical, some differences were noted in the deeper structures and nuances of their everyday lives. There were differences in the way females and males handled routine paperwork and in the way they used observation tours in the schools. The verbal contacts of female superintendents differed from those of males in that they interacted more frequently with their professional peers and almost exclusively with their female counterparts. Females were more often involved in teaching classes at local universities and in sponsoring women teachers for leadership positions; spent more of their unscheduled time working on curriculum and instruction matters and less on politics and maintaining connections; normally ate lunch alone at their desks rather than in restaurants; and were more informal in style and language than the males. (Author/IRT)

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Notes on the Differences in the Behavior of Women Superintendents in Suburban Districts

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The majority of the employees in educational organizations are women but their numbers decrease with each step up the hierarchical ladder. Fewer than one percent of the school superintendents are women. Much of the research that has attempted to uncover the factors responsible for the underrepresentation of women at managerial levels has focused on two problems: First, on the acculturation that has resulted in role ambiguity and limited aspirations for women;[1] and second, on the barriers society creates that prevent all but exceptional women from reaching positions of leadership.[2]

What do we know about the women who have managed to pass through the various filters and have arrived at the top of the school system? We know that they are older and less often married and have more education and classroom experience.[3] But, what about their work? Is man's work different when a woman is performing the role? This paper examines three women superintendents for the purpose of answering the question: Are the work activities different when the superintendent is a woman?

To arrive at an answer to this question, I observed three women superintendents for one week each as they worked during the fall of 1979.[4] In a similar study in 1977, I observed three male superintendents.[5] The central purpose of both studies was to observe, describe, and analyze the actual on-the-job behavior of the suburban superintendent so as to develop an integrated view of the nature of the position. Several questions guided the inquiry into the everyday life of the suburban school superintendent: Where does the superintendent spend time? What kinds of information does the superintendent possess? With whom must the superintendent work

and at whose request? What is the purpose and duration of each activity and contact?

A field study approach along the lines of Mintzberg's study of managers was used to generate a description of the structure and content of superintendent work.[6] Structured and unstructured observations guided the inquiry. The behavior of superintendents was classified in terms of seven major types of activities: unscheduled meetings, scheduled meetings, desk work, telephone calls, travel, tours, and conferences. Each of these activities was classified according to specific dimensions: Who initiated the activity? Who were the participants in the activity? Where did the activity occur? and What was the content and purpose of the activity? These data were recorded in three records: a chronology record identifying the sequence of the activities, a contact record giving detailed information for each contact that involved the superintendent, and a written communications record that described each piece of incoming and outgoing mail. In both studies, the superintendents permitted the observer to watch them in almost all types of work situations, for example, during board meetings, staff meetings, individual conferences with subordinates and community members, off-the-record meetings with their peers, and in moments alone.

Taking a closer look at the two samples, we know that both males and females were in their first superintendency and were career-bound as opposed to place-bound; they had had previous experience in other school districts and had doctoral degrees in educational administration. While all the males were superintendents of K-12 suburban districts, two of the females were superintendents of suburban elementary school districts.

And, females differed from the males in one major respect. They traveled the traditional career route from teacher to principal to central office administrator to superintendent while the males skipped the principalship.

Characteristics of Superintendent Work

What do superintendents, who also happen to be women, do? In sum, their work is characterized by:

1. A low degree of self-initiated tasks,
2. Many activities of short duration,
3. Discontinuity due to interruptions,
4. The needs of others in the organization superceding prior plans,
5. Face-to-face verbal contacts with one other person,
6. Variability of tasks,
7. An extensive network of individuals and groups internal and external to the school district,
8. A hectic and unpredictable flow of work,
9. Numerous unimportant decisions and trivial agendas,
10. Few attempts at written communication,
11. Events occurring in or near the administrator's office,
12. Interactions predominately with subordinates, and
13. A preference for problems and information that are specific rather than general; concrete, solvable, and currently pressing.

We found that attending to the mail, telephone calls, and meetings accounted for almost every minute from the moment the superintendents entered their offices in the morning until they departed in the evening. The interruptions of phone calls and drop-in meetings and the frequent need to leave

their desk work to attend to the myriad of matters on their mind makes the day quite fragmented as a superintendent tries to resolve the current and future concerns of the district.

The activities encountered by female superintendents in a typical work day do not reveal an exotic story. The tasks do not approach the lofty ideals of "Leadership" and do not coincide with the image of an executive as a reflective planner.

But, what is significant here is that these characteristics of the work of female superintendents are identical with the work activities of male superintendents. The actual world of administrators does not resemble the textbook image. But, while this holds true for both males and females, there were differences among individuals, as well as differences between male and female samples. In previous work the focus has been on the similarity the invariant characteristics of superintendent work. The focus in this paper is on the differences between the male and female samples.

Differences

For example, while the average work week was 44 hours, the range was from 36 to 55 hours, two of the three work weeks that exceeded 50 hours were those of women superintendents. All superintendents, however, reported working a 60-hour week. Female superintendents spent one-half the amount of time males spent engaged in desk work in the office. Desk work is the processing of paper, reviewing mail (most of which is unsolicited and warrants minimal attention), writing responses to requests,

initiating written correspondence and dictation. Female superintendents did their paper work in the evening at home. Males rarely reported doing routine paperwork at home; but they did report doing budget preparations which requires more attention, either at home or in the office on the weekend. One male superintendent ritualistically filled up his attache case each evening with professional literature only to admit the following morning that he never looked at it.

Another difference between males and females was in their use of the observation tour. The amount of time spent and the purpose of the tour are left to the discretion of each superintendent. Female superintendents averaged more and longer tours. More importantly, females used their tours to visit classrooms and teachers, keeping abreast of the instructional program, while males used the time to walk the halls with the principals requesting that they follow up on particular concerns.

Teachers and students responded favorably to visits by female superintendents, eagerly demonstrating what was going on, including any difficulties they were having. Male superintendents did not visit classrooms during the data collection phase of this study except in the case of teachers who had quasi-administrative assignments, or were the president of the Teachers Union. During the tours, both male and female superintendents met mostly with professionals of their own sex.

The interest of female superintendents in curriculum and instruction was apparent in their memberships in the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). In addition, they belonged to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). While females were able to articulate the specific ideology and activities that dominated

the district's curricular program, men appeared to speak of aspects of organizational structure, such as the construction of a new school building, approval of a tax levy, and the graduation of a senior class.

Network of Contacts

The single dominant pattern that characterized superintendents' activities was their constant communication. Superintending is communicating.[8] They communicated with municipal authorities, State Departments of Education, teachers, parents, residents of the community, attorneys, and other colleagues, and they spent the major part of their time with subordinates. The verbal contacts of female superintendents differed in five respects: (1) they interacted more frequently with their professional peers, and almost exclusively with their female counterparts; (2) they were formally involved in the training of administrators teaching classes in local universities and in sponsoring women teachers within the district for leadership positions within the outside of the school district; (3) women generally spent their unscheduled time handling curriculum and instruction matters, while men were involved with political activities, campaigning for a candidate for office in the state affiliate of AASA, eating lunch in local restaurants, maintaining liaisons with the State Department of Education, and trying to capture the State Teacher-of-the-Year Award for the district; (4) women superintendents normally ate lunch alone in their offices or at home rather than in restaurants in the community, while men used luncheon invitations for exposure, visibility, and to make connections;[9] and (5) the women's style and language were more informal.[10]

What about the differences between males and females we uncovered? Are they significant? Gross et al. report that there are great differences among male superintendents in their role behavior.[11] One difficulty regarding differences in the range of acceptable behavior and expression for superintendents is that: Women are defined, as they always have been, as "the others." Men set, and thus are, the standard. The way men act and talk is normal and reasonable, and anything that deviates is often viewed as strange and illogical. Behavior that is "normale" or different is often thought of as "bad." Are the differences outside the acceptable range of behavior for superintendents?

Let's examine a few of these differences more closely. We noted several differences in women's language and style. First, they encouraged their staff--administrators, teachers, secretaries, and custodians--to address them by their first name. Second, they permitted more participation in decision making. Third, they used their lunch hours differently. Fourth, they visited classrooms and seemed to be more involved in the instructional program. How do others interpret it when women superintendents behave differently in a role?

First, let's examine the use of first name. Key points out that women are generally in lower status positions than men and thus likelier to receive first name address from males than to call males by their first name.[12] In this case, however, the women are in the higher status positions. The first name, which is one of the commonest forms of address used by Americans, carries many varied messages. For example, when an employer calls employees by their first names, it can either express power or solidarity. When employees don't reciprocate, it might

be interpreted as the employees deference in a power-marked dyad. Its reciprocal use might denote non-intimacy between power equals.

On the other hand, if a female secretary addresses a female executive by her first name and a male by his last name, it may indicate either greater solidarity with the woman boss or less respect for her. Many feminists have argued that, even outside hierarchical organizations, a woman is more likely than a man of roughly equal status to be called by her first name by new acquaintances.

William F. Buckley wrote a column entitled, "Would You Call This Women Margaret?" that dealt with his inadvertently addressing Margaret Thatcher, head of the British Conservative Party, by her first name. He reported that he thought she had addressed him as "Bill" but discovered later that she had simply been referring to a piece of legislation. On the other hand, Barbara Walters, television reporter, encourages others to call her by her first name regardless of the situation. During one of the televised Presidential Debates, both presidential candidates addressed the male journalists by their titled last names but referred to Ms. Walters by her first name.

The situation is confused and confusing if men and women in the same occupational slots are called by different forms of address. Since there is only one superintendent in a district, the use of the first name is less problematic than in a situation where there are males and females occupying similar positions in an organization and they are addressed differently. Since the female superintendents were more participatory in their administrative style, it is assumed that the first name used by subordinates reflects an attempt at this power equalization.

Second, let's examine style. It was noted that women used instant agendas and did not dominate the discussion, thus increasing the participation of subordinates. Anyone who wanted to discuss an issue added the time to the handwritten list or the chalkboard just before the meeting began. The scheduled meetings were structured, for the most part, to neutralize status differences, with all members assumming an equal part in the construction and presentation of the agenda. This attitude seems to reflect the dominant ideology of the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Design (ASCD) and a less dominant and more responsive leadership style.

In addition, women used meetings with subordinates as a forum for considering possibilities. They used verbs like "think," "wonder," and "guess" which require a specific response and imply uncertainty, hesitancy, and less than a full commitment to the judgment. During one administrative cabinet meeting, a woman superintendent asked, "How many people are suing us? A male superintendent would have asked this of the appropriate person prior to the meeting and then during the meeting announced, "We have three lawsuits facing us now," after which he would have given the floor to the administrators who had been delegated the responsibility.

Third, let's consider how superintendents used their lunch hours. It is easy to suggest that superintendents, male or female, ought to use their lunch hour to make contacts with the community power structure--government officials, business people, and service clubs thought to be limited to males. It is in service clubs that superintendents meet business men, who supposedly have district's financial issues. It is believed that women's

inability to break into a white male club seriously limits their careers. Research suggests, however, that mothers of elementary-aged children are more instrumental than males when it comes to voting affirmatively in school financial elections.[13]

This suggests that male superintendents may have other reasons for belonging to service clubs, such as the desire to be thought of as a businessman and to project the efficiency of the school districts.[14] Since teaching is a feminized profession it makes sense that male superintendents may not want to be regarded as a "Teacher of Teachers." This calls to question the effects on the superintendency of women superintendents regarding themselves as instructional leaders. Will this result in a lowered status for the position, or do women only acquire jobs in undesirable lower status districts in the first place? (We will pursue this discussion in the next part.) This argument, however, does not address the question of why female superintendents do not visit restaurants during the lunch hour where the members of the community power structure are likely to be.

Is it because they are excluded? Or, because they might be gossiped about and treated as if they were "looking for a good time"? Or what? Attitudes about sexual relations among men and women in this society, and about related mundane issues, may influence the behavior of both male and female superintendents. This may explain why female superintendents spend more time with female teachers and superintendents; and why male superintendents elect to spend their time with principals, head custodians, and male peers. One female superintendent reported that she was visited by a principal's wife the morning after a long board meeting; the wife suspected possible transgressions.

Fourth, we found that female superintendents visited classroom and interacted with teachers more frequently. One explained that this enabled her to respond to board inquiries about the instructional program. It is worthy to view this in light of the observation that educational organizations typically lack internal coordination especially in their main activity, instruction. Meyer and Rowan note that educators resort to "a logic of confidence;" higher levels assume that what is going on at the lower levels makes sense and conforms to rules, but avoid inspecting it to discover and assume responsibility for inconsistencies.[15] When female superintendents enter classrooms they appear to be violating this norm. Do principals feel that their authority has been usurped? If so, this could be problematic.

Two of the aforementioned differences in the characteristics of superintendent work of females are especially noteworthy: the emphasis on instruction and the attempts at power equalization. Taken together they suggest a role that is significantly different from the typical interpretations of the role. This "deviant behavior" may have several consequences. The least significant of which is role incumbents, whether male or female, have a great deal of choice in their behavior; and school boards may select superintendents based upon the image superintendent applicants project. Gross' research evidence suggests that different expectations held for incumbents' behavior and attitudes are crucial for an understanding of their different behaviors and characteristics. We do know that superintendents and school board members often disagree about the expectations for the role. We do know, for example, that school board members perceive that superintendents should be more expert in financial matters that they are.

While board members select superintendents, they often consult with professors of educational administration and staff members of the School Boards Association, frequently former school administrators. It appears that school administrators may be able to apply sanctions to any group that does not conform to the standards established by them. This holds true for males and females.

On the other hand, with the servere criticism that schools are receiving, a different focus for the role--creating conditions for effective teaching--might be forthcoming. But, superintendents are too far removed from the technical core for this role to be feasible. In addition, the technology of instruction is itself uncertain. It is difficult to determine the extent to which any number of factors, including teacher performance and type of instructional program, contribute to student performance. How can a superintendent control that which is only poorly understood? Both of these aspects of superintendent work need to be researched more extensively.

It seems that differences in superintendent work do not appear in the surface structure of their activities but in the deeper structures and nuances of their everyday lives. Kanter[16] makes a case for the absence of sex differences in work behavior and argues instead that attitudes and behavior at work are a function of one's location in the organizational structure. We have pursued this argument by examining women at the top of the school hierarchy who have many of the same social characteristics as men occupying the same formal position in other suburban school districts.

This paper supports Kanter's observations that attitudes and behavior at work is a function of one's location in the organizational structure. Women at the top of the school hierarchy share many of the same characteristics as men occupying the same formal position in other suburban districts. We did note some differences in the deeper structures and nuances of their everyday lives. Further research is needed to determine if these differences are significant for the superintendency in general and for women who are or hope to be superintendents.

Notes

1. See, for example, E.E. Maccoby (ed.), The Development of Sex Differences (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1966); J.S. Coleman, The Adolescent Society (New York: Free Press, 1961); M.S. Horner, "Fail: Bright Women," Psychology Today 3 (November, 1969): 36-62; C.F. Epstein, Bringing Women In: Rewards, Punishments and the Structure of Achievement," Annuals of the New York Academy of Sciences (March, 1973); H. Astin, N. Suriewick, and S. Sweck, Women: A Bibliography on Their Education and Careers (Washington, D.C.: Human Service Press, 1971); P. Schwartz and J. Lever, "Women in the Male World of Higher Education," Academic Women on the Move eds. A. Rossi and A. Calderwood (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1973).

2. See, for example, P. Roby, "Institutional Barriers to Women in Higher Education," Academic Women on the Move eds. A. Rossi and A. Calderwood (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1973); W.H. Sewell, "Inequality of Opportunity for Higher Education," American Sociological Review 36 (October, 1971): 793-809; P. Schwartz, and J. Level, "Women in the Male World of Higher Education" Academic Women on the Move eds. A. Rossi and A. Calderwood (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1973); C.F. Epstein, "Bringing Women In: Rewards, Punishments and the Structure of Achievement," Annuals of New York Academy of Sciences (March, 1973).

3. S. Paddock, "Women's Careers in Administration" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oregon, 1978).

4. A full report of the observations is contained in N.J. Pitner, "Hormones and Harems: Are the Activities of Superintending Different for a Woman?" The Sex Dimension in Educational Policy and Management eds. P.A. Schmuck and W.W. Charters, Jr.)New York: Academic Press, 1981).

5. N.J. Pitner, "Descriptive Study of the Everyday Activities of Suburban School Superintendents: The Management of Information" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1978).

6. H. Mintzberg, The Nature of Managerial Work (New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

8. N.J. Pitner and R.T. Ogawa, "Organizational Leadership: The Case of the School Superintendent," Educational Administration Quarterly XVII (Spring, 1981): 45-66.

9. One female did go out one day with a neighborhood newspaper reporter, also female, to a moderately priced cafeteria noted for its salad bar. The patrons did not represent the power structure, however, they were dominantly housewives, clerks in retail stores, and secretaries.

10. On the average, women superintendents were casual in their dress and did not adopt the skirted-suit uniform suggested for women executives (Malloy, 1977). Although their dress was not provocative, frilly, or pink, it was not classic in styling. The more casual dress of the women cannot be accounted for by the casual attitudes of the West Coast because their male subordinates consistently wore coats and ties. When one woman accepted the position in the district, she reported that the male administrators had asked whether they should wear a coat and tie; and she had replied that it did not matter. A young male superintendent, on the other hand, was noticeably annoyed when some of the principals appeared at a board meeting without coats.

11. N. Gross, W.S. Mason, and A.W. McEachern, Explorations in Role Analysis (New York: Wiley, 1958).

12. M.R. Key, Male/Female Language (Metuchen, N.Y.: Scarecrow Press, 1975).

13. P. Piele and J.S. Hall, Budgets, Bonds and Ballots (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1973).

14. R.E. Callahan, Education and the Cult of Efficiency (Chicago: University Press, 1962).

15. J. Meyer and B. Rowan, "Notes on the Structure of Educational Organizations: Revised Edition," Paper presented at the Annual American Sociological Association meeting, San Francisco, California (1975).

16. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Men and Women of the Corportation (New York, Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, 1977).